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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of a large-scale portfolio pilot in which over 2,000 secondary students submitted portfolios in language arts, mathematics, and science classes. Students were asked to select work for their portfolios based on the criteria that would be used to evaluate the work. Students also reflected on how their work satisfied the scoring criteria and wrote a self-reflective cover letter to the reader of the portfolio. Thirty-six of these cover letters were reviewed. A report of the ways students responded to the task and specific types of outcomes that may be achieved with language arts portfolios is presented. Findings show that, through the use of large-scale portfolio assessment, students can realize educational outcomes that are not afforded in an educational system that focuses on traditional goals such as acquiring content knowledge and performing well on standardized multiple-choice tests. Students in this study were able to reflect on and formulate statements about their personal beliefs and values, their understandings of themselves as learners and writers, their abilities and skills as writers, and their goals and aspirations. An appendix presents directions for writing the cover letter. (SLD)

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Student Reflection in Portfolio Assessment

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council for Measurement in Education in New York, NY (April, 1996).

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Abstract

This paper reports the results of a large-scale portfolio pilot in which over 2,000 secondary students submitted portfolios in language arts, mathematics, and science classes. Students were asked to select work for their portfolios based on the criteria that would be used to evaluate the work. Students also reflected on how their work satisfied the scoring criteria and wrote a self-reflective cover letter to the reader of the portfolio. A report of ways students responded to the task and specific types of outcomes that may be achieved with language arts portfolios is presented..

Student Reflection in Portfolio Assessment

Portfolio assessment is becoming increasingly popular as an assessment tool because portfolios allows teachers to evaluate student performance on educational outcomes that cannot be assessed with traditional testing formats. For example portfolios can be used to assess how well students work on long-term projects, collaborate with others, develop a piece of work over time, and reflect on their own learning. Because portfolios are such an integral part of the classroom, they are also useful as a tool for integrating curricula and diagnosing student needs. Not only do portfolios facilitate good instruction, but they also empower students to take control of their learning. Portfolios do this by giving students control over what materials are assessed, allowing them to participate in the evaluation of their own work, and giving them the opportunity to share their own reflections on their learning with the assessor.

This paper reports the results of a large-scale portfolio pilot in which secondary students submitted portfolios in language arts classes. Students were asked to select work for their portfolios based on the criteria that would be used to evaluate the work. Students also evaluated how well their work satisfied the scoring criteria and wrote a self-reflective cover letter to the reader of the portfolio. This paper identifies a number of non-traditional educational outcomes that were realized by having students write this reflective cover letter as part of their portfolios.

Background

In recent years, some educators have raised concerns about whether the incentives that are frequently associated with performing well on high-stakes multiple choice tests shift the

focus of classroom instruction away from the kinds of complex cognitive skills and knowledge that may be deemed important by parents and educators (Frederiksen, 1984). The educational community has reacted to this concern by developing standards for student achievement and developing more *authentic* assessment formats that emphasize the specific skills that are deemed most desirable (Wiggins, 1989). The important characteristic of these tests is that they are *direct* assessments. That is, they preserve the complexity of the cognitive skill being assessed rather than decomposing it into smaller components--components that are merely correlated with the cognitive skill being assessed (Resnick & Resnick, 1992). These new types of assessment are powerful catalysts for reforming educational practice because they induce changes in instruction that foster the development of different types of cognitive skills than have typically been tapped by multiple choice tests. One such skill is reflecting on one's own learning.

There has been a considerable body of literature generated concerning how to promote student reflection and how classroom assessments can engender such habits in students. However, little work has been done to determine how large-scale assessments can induce such habits in students. Unfortunately, the efforts of teachers to emphasize reflection in the classroom may be thwarted by the financial and political drive to maintain high scores on standardized assessments. As a result, it seems that the values that lead to the adoption of portfolio assessment formats must be adopted in a large-scale assessment context if the goal of inducing curriculum reform in line with these broader views of educational outcomes is to be realized. That is, portfolio assessments must be used on a large-scale if we truly want to achieve the types of student outcomes that are tapped by these assessment formats.

The idea of encouraging teachers to "teach to the test" by focusing instructional efforts on well-defined educational outcomes and allowing students to show evidence of achieving those outcomes is a radical departure from the philosophy that has driven large-scale testing programs in the past. Keeping testing materials secure and, in a sense, hidden from teachers and students prevented educators from using one of their strongest attributes--their ability to adapt and modify ideas and materials to fit the needs and characteristics of the local population of students. Educators are now beginning to advocate a melding of classroom assessment with large-scale testing, particularly with respect to the use of portfolios (Freedman, 1993).

The *ACT Portfolio Project* is a developmental project designed to collect the actual classroom work of students in grades 9 through 12 to assess their capabilities in language arts (reading and writing). The goal for the project is to design an assessment tool that will be valued as an instructional aid and as a means for collecting information about the capabilities of students. A secondary goal is to evaluate portfolio assessment methodology to determine whether portfolio assessment results can be used for purposes outside of the classroom.

A student's *ACT Portfolio* is a showcase portfolio that documents student's performance during each year of high school. As a result, student performance during grade nine can be compared to that student's portfolio from grade ten to show how his or her best work has changed over time. Because students create a new portfolio for each year they are in school and because these portfolios are evaluated on the same scale, it is possible to determine the growth exhibited by a student by comparing his/her performance on the *ACT Portfolio* from grades nine through twelve.

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In compiling their portfolios, students select pieces of their classroom work that show that they can perform a variety of tasks that are commonly included in secondary language arts curricula. The features of each piece of work are defined by a menu of Work Sample Descriptions which broadly define the of types of work that may be included in the portfolio. For example, Work Sample Descriptions in language arts may include expository writing, narrative writing, poetry, evaluating media, or critically reviewing a literary text. Students select five of these Work Sample Descriptions and provide samples of their best work from the current academic year. Scoring rubrics are shared with students and guidelines are provided to help them make their decisions.

The *ACT Portfolio* also requires students to reflect on their learning and accomplishments by writing a self-reflective cover letter. The purpose for the cover letter is to help people who read the student's portfolio to understand how the portfolio demonstrates mastery of specific skills and concepts and how that mastery relates to the student's growth and goals. This means that the cover letter is a vital components not only in helping students understand themselves but also helping readers understand the significance of the various components of the portfolios.

This paper reports the results of efforts to promote student reflection via a large-scale portfolio assessment by reviewing how students responded to the task of writing a self-reflective cover letter for the *ACT Portfolio*. The purpose is to demonstrate the variety of outcomes that can be realized by having students reflect on their learning through portfolio cover letters. In the following sections, a framework is presented for the types of statements that students made in their letters, and examples of the types of statements made by students are provided.

Method

The participants in this study were students from seven secondary public and private schools who took participated as Design Partners in the *ACT Portfolio Project*--a large-scale portfolio system designed to use regular classroom work for assessment purposes outside of the classroom. These schools were selected for their geographic and demographic diversity. During the school year, students collected samples of their work for inclusion in a portfolio that was submitted to ACT at the end of the academic year for a pilot scoring project. Rubrics were shared with students as were guidelines for selecting their work. After all materials had been compiled, students were asked to write a self-reflective cover letter to the reader of the portfolio. Appendix A shows the directions for writing the cover letter that were shared with students.

For this study, student cover letters were reviewed to identify the variety of ways that students chose to respond to these directions. The author reviewed 36 cover letters from students across the seven schools. During this review, the author made notes about the types of issues that were presented by students. Based on these notes, an *ad hoc* coding system was created for organizing and describing the comments made by students. The following section describes the results of these analyses.

Results

In general, the comments students made in their cover letters fell into six broad categories: *Historical/Biographical, Descriptive, Evaluative, Goals, Personal,* and *Learning/Work Habits*. *History/Biographical* comments concerned the student's biographical information (e.g., family information, physical characteristics, age, etc.) and educational history (e.g., where the student went to school and dates of graduation). These comments

addressed questions such as: *Who am I? Who is in my family? What is my educational history? Where do I live?* and *What kind of student am I? Descriptive* comments, on the other hand, concerned how the portfolio was organized, what it contained, the process of compiling and selecting entries, and the activities the student completed for the course. These comments addressed questions such as: *In what class did I construct this portfolio? How is the portfolio organized? How did I select the entries? What are the topics for the entries? For what assignments were these entries created?* and *What did I do in this course?*. Because *Descriptive* and *Historical/Biographical* comments are not the main interest of this study, further discussion of how these comments manifested themselves in the cover letters is not presented here. The remaining sections provide detailed descriptions of the remaining four categories and composite examples of how students made such statements in their cover letters.

Personal

One of the most common type of comment made by students in their cover letters were *Personal* in nature. *Personal* statements had to do with the student's values, beliefs, and preferences. Typically, these statements addressed questions such as: *Why did I choose these entries? What did I like/dislike about the assignments? How do these pieces represent me as a writer? What do I like/value/feel is important? Why is writing important? Who has been influential in my life?* By making statements like these, students are required to consider their own values and practice communicating those values to others.

Below are examples that represent the kinds of *Personal* statements that were found in students' cover letters.

Personal Example #1: *My **Critique of a Literary Text** was the first essay that I wrote this year, and I felt very proud of the way I took on the challenge of this difficult assignment. I put a lot of effort into the project. It is not just the essay I was proud of, but the way that I examined the story. It was a story that I really enjoyed reading and writing about, despite its level of difficulty.*

Personal Example #2: *The **Narrative Essay** was my first piece, and it was the most fun to write. I wasn't thinking about all the little details needed in writing an essay, so it truly is something that reflects naivety. It was fun to write and brought back good memories, the kind of writing people like to experience.*

Personal Example #3: *Writing is important in my life because it teaches me to express myself to my friends, teachers, and peers. I keep a daily journal and have five pen pals that I write to regularly. Writing down my thoughts is one of my favorite things to do.*

Learning/Work Habits

Although not as common as *Personal* statements, comments about *Learning* and *Work Habits* were typical in many cover letters. *Learning/Work Habit* statements focused on describing the student's accomplishments, learning habits, and metaknowledge of one's own learning or writing preferences. Typically, these statements addressed questions such as: *How challenging were these pieces of writing and why? What did I learn by completing my portfolio? How have I changed over time? What is difficult/easy for me to do? How did I develop each piece over time? What do I do when I write? What are my personal writing habits?* By making statements like these, students are required to engage in metathinking and to develop a better understanding of how they think and learn as writers. They are also required to communicate this knowledge to others by including it in the cover letter.

Below are examples of the types of *Learning/Work Habits* statements that students included in their cover letters.

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Learning/Work Habits Example #1: *All of my portfolio entries helped me to convince myself of who I am. I've never had to state my position on these topics, and writing about them solidified my views. I had to gather my feelings and evaluate them ... to figure out where I stood. This has prepared me for future questionings of my views.*

Learning/Work Habits Example #2: *I read difficult books often, but to understand the material I read it at a slower pace to comprehend all of the information and details. As a writer I take my time to think of how I want to write my paper, how I want it to turn out, and I revise my paper many times, correcting and recorrecting.*

Learning/Work Habits Example #3: *When I write, I usually draw a web of my thoughts. I write the main idea for my paper in a circle. Branching out from the main circle are supporting ideas also in circles. With so many circles branching from other circles, the finished product resembles a web. After this step, it helps to further organize these thoughts into an outline. Then I type a first draft, not worrying about errors but just getting my ideas on paper and in paragraph form. Then the revision process begins. First, I revise the paper a few times. I offer the paper to a friend for more revisions. Then I set the paper aside for a few days, and upon return I can make more changes having had time to forget about it for awhile. Finally the final draft is produced.*

Evaluative

Evaluative statements were slightly less common than were *Personal* or *Learning/Work Habits* comments. *Evaluative* statements dealt with how the student assessed his/her own work. *Evaluative* comments answered questions such as: *What are my strengths/weaknesses? What do I need to continue to improve? What is good/not good about the individual pieces in my portfolio?* By making statements like these, students are required to engage in self-evaluation, comparing their work to the set of standards contained in the scoring rubric. They are also required to consider how they will communicate their thinking about the quality of their work to others as they write the cover letter.

Below are examples of the kinds of *Evaluative* statements contained in cover letters for the *ACT Portfolio*.

Evaluative Example #1: *The strengths of this essay are certain details such as the way I describe the mountain scenery in my first portfolio entry. The description helps the audience imagine the peace that I felt during my vacation. If I were to rewrite the essay, I would still like to use more details with better adjectives and verbs.*

Evaluative Example #2: *When it comes to writing about personal, memorable experiences, I am not very good. I find it hard to convey my ideas and feelings on paper. However, I am developing a better sense of how to accompany this. But, I still need practice and development. I am not a very fast reader, but I am a proficient and diligent reader.*

Evaluative Example #3: *One piece that I thought I could have done a better job on was my description about the first time I fell in love. I had my ideas down but it may not have been clear enough for somebody else that didn't have the same expectations of love as me to understand what I meant. Another piece that I could have done more with was the assignment where I pretended to be a character in a movie writing a letter to another character. I think that I could have gotten deeper into my character's head than I did.*

Goals

Interestingly, *Goals* statements were one of the least common types of comments made in student cover letters. Comments about a student's *Goals* dealt with what the student planned or hoped to accomplish in the next year, over his/her high school and college career, and what the student expected to accomplish over his/her lifetime. *Goals* statements answered questions such as: *What do I hope to accomplish next year? What are my post-graduation plans? What will I do for a living?* By including *Goals* statements in their cover letters, students are required to think about what they will accomplish in the long-term and, perhaps, begin to think about how they will accomplish these tasks.

Below are examples of *Goals* statements similar to ones contained in cover letters for the *ACT Portfolio*.

Goals Example #1: *I plan on majoring in Psychology and minoring in Women's Studies or Child Development. Hopefully, I will be working with abused women in a clinic, or maybe even be a therapist with abused children.*

Goals Example #2: *After graduating from high school, I hope to attend a good college and eventually get married and raise a family. I'm not quite sure what I'd like to do for a career, but I know that I love to dance, act, write, and work with animals.*

Goals Example #3: *I hope that in the next few years of school I will learn to become a strong writer while developing a better understanding of science.*

Discussion

These examples show that, through the use of large-scale portfolio assessment, student can realize educational outcomes that are not afforded in an educational system that focuses on traditional goals such as acquiring content knowledge and performing well on standardized multiple choice tests. Students in the *ACT Portfolio Project* were able to reflect on and formulate statements about their personal beliefs and values, their own understandings of themselves and learners and writers, their abilities and skills as writers, and their goals and aspirations. For educators who value these types of outcomes, this is encouraging news. By implementing large-scale portfolio assessments, educators may be able to induce changes in traditional curricula so that instruction emphasizes broader, more holistic goals relating to students' personal development.

Of course, this study focuses on only a small sample size and raises more questions than it answers. Future studies of how student reflection can be promoted by implementing portfolio assessments in the classroom need to determine three things. First, it is unclear whether reflection is a unique trait or if it is simply a naturally-occurring expression of overall achievement. That is, future studies of student reflection should aim to determine whether the quality of a student's reflective piece in a portfolio is strongly related to the

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overall quality of the rest of the pieces in the portfolio. Second, if educators hope to further student development by engaging young writers in reflective writing, it will be necessary to determine whether practice and experience in this mode of writing actually improves the quality of the reflections students produce over time.

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Appendix

Directions for Writing the Cover Letter

The following guidelines are suggested for students writing self-reflective letters in language arts as part of ACT's Portfolio System.

WRITING THE SELF-REFLECTIVE LETTER

This self-reflective letter introduces you and your work to readers who will review your portfolio. You may assume these readers are interested adults who may or may not know you. These readers may help you make decisions about your future educational or employment plans. The self-reflective letter allows you to describe your work and to explain what you believe you have accomplished. Your letter should highlight those aspects of your work of which you are most pleased.

Your letter may be of any length. We suggest it contain these sections.

Introduction: This will provide a first look at your work and should help give a complete picture of what you have done. You may want to include some of the following information in any order you wish:

- a general description of the selection process you used in creating your portfolio.
- important choices you made in constructing your portfolio.
- challenges you encountered doing the activities included in your portfolio.

Portfolio Description: You may want to go back and look at the reflective pieces you did earlier to get ideas for this section. You may want to include a description of your writing and reading processes, connections that you see between various pieces of your writing and reading, and connections between your writing and reading and your life outside of school.

Conclusion: This helps to complete your description of the portfolio process. You may want to include in any order you wish:

- why a particular piece is your best or favorite one.
- how the pieces in the portfolio relate to your future writing goals.
- how your work improved.
- areas of future growth.
- how you met the challenges of creating your portfolio.
- your development as a writing student.
- benefits gained as you worked in your classes.